

Sermon for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, 2009  
 Mark 1:9-15  
 Trinity Church

I have an e-mail friend. I suppose you could call him an e-pal. He is an agnostic, but he enjoys reading the sermons I sometimes send him. Not long ago, I told him that I was working on a sermon, but didn't know quite where it was headed. His reply was, "Preach about sin and be against it."

We tend to think that Lent is about sin; but that's only part of it and a minor part at that. Lent is about God's power unleashed upon the world; God's kingdom as setting the conditions for history; God's love as establishing the quality of human community.

That's what St. Mark tells us on this first Sunday in Lent and his words are the voice of thunder. He tells us that when Jesus was baptized the heavens were **torn apart, split asunder**, broken open in a way that could never be closed up, the very heart of God exposed. "Ripped apart": that's the expression Mark uses in his language and our anemic English translates as "rend." That was too much for Matthew and Luke when they describe the baptism of Jesus. They say only, "the heavens opened" -- a flabby compromise with Mark's explosive announcement.

That is Christ. That is the Incarnation. That is God in our midst. That is God unleashed on the world. That is God's power unleashed in our church, not to be confined in our liturgies or our laws or our cherished traditions. God will be God, and Jesus is his Christ. And in his name, powerful things can happen.

When Jesus rises his baptismal water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit coming down like a dove. The vision his. Only his. And for him and him alone is the voice. "You are my Son, my beloved Son."

And the dove. The gentle dove. The dove suggests a benediction. The benediction of the Holy Spirit. It was that, but there was also a darker, more somber meaning. Jesus would not have missed it. From that torn-apart sky the dove was also a symbol of sacrifice. Jesus would not have missed it; for the dove was the only living creature that was lawful for sacrifice in the Temple. Along with the blessing, there was an intimation of the Cross.

Immediately, Jesus went away into the stony wasteland for his time of testing and decision. Spiritually-gifted men and women from many cultures have done just what Jesus did. Through the ordeal of isolation and fasting meditation they have searched for a sign, some supernatural experience that would confirm the spiritual vision and vocation. Jesus heard the voice from the shattered heaven, but he had to test it in his own visionary ordeal. The call came from God, but the response had to come from Jesus, freely and voluntarily. Against the background both of blessing and sacrifice, there was a hard choice to be made. It insisted upon the

ordeal of discernment, the wrestling with temptation, the temptation to say no to the cross or to say yes for the wrong reason.

Forty days sets the limit of our Lent as we go through our own process of discernment and self examination according to the practice of the Church. Forty days. But count on your calendars the actual number of days between Ash Wednesday and Easter. There are forty-five days in Lent. Why? Because Sundays don't count. They don't count because every Sunday is an Easter. Every Sunday is a feast of the resurrection. In spite of all the ways we try to make Lent more sober and somber, this day is a day of rest and gladness, a day of joy and light. The bare sanctuary, the wooden cross, all of that is a part of the liturgical drama. The drama has its purpose. Drama is at the heart of our humanity as well as the basis of our ritual. The bare simplicity of Lent makes the bright glory of Easter Sunday the brighter and more glorious to our tired eyes.

But let me add a word of caution: It is entirely too easy to make the drama into melodrama and confuse the symbols with the reality. "Rend your hearts and not your garments," the Scripture says, recognizing the all-too-human tendency to make the outward performance the purpose in itself. Lent is a time of spiritual discernment, remembering Jesus' own entirely human need to confirm his spiritual vision as a spirit person. And there is some stony ground to cover.

When Jesus emerged from the wilderness he uttered what would be the outline of his entire life purpose. His message: The kingdom of heaven has arrived. God is on the loose. Repent. This is the Good News. The key word is "Repent."

June tells about going as a child with a friend to the Pentecostal Bible School in Burwell, Nebraska. At the end of the week the children were urged, even demanded, to kneel and "confess their sins" -- publicly! The children, in their innocence couldn't think of any behaviors that qualified, so they had to invent "sins". Little bits of imagined naughtiness. If you think about it, that could be a place where innocence was lost and genuine sin began to intrude! Think about that: a conscious adoption of lies that eventually become self-deceiving or self-justifying. In our adulthood and encroaching age, most of us have developed the false and self-defensive front into a fine art -- so fine an art that we fool ourselves and don't realize that it's happening. I know in moments of painful reflection that I have done that.

There is the story of a young minister who preached a resounding sermon on repentance and forgiveness. Later, at the church door, one of the elderly saints in the departing congregation said to him, "Young man, you haven't lived long enough to sin enough to understand the meaning of forgiveness."

Repent. And while we are contemplating our sins, we might give some passing consideration to what we think of as our virtues. Virtue unexamined can easily,

secretly, slip over into self-righteousness. That can be as corrosive to the soul and as disruptive of relationships as outright sin, no matter how cordial a face we may paint over it.

Repent. Words are very territorial creatures. Their meanings do not migrate easily from one language to another, from one culture to another, or from one point in time to a later one. They don't do that without sacrificing some fragment of themselves. Some significance gets stripped off along the way and often some new idea gets grafted on. It's like that with the awesome word "repent." We trim it down to the dimension of our own viewpoint and the limits of our own vocabulary. It gets confined to the notion of "feeling sorry." We have taken it almost exclusively to mean that we ought to feel sorry for what we done wrong, whatever is offensive in the sight of God -- all those things that the Prayer of Confession covers with its broad brush.

It is all of that. But there is something more. Repentance, the word itself, contains an immensely larger meaning, one that is profoundly comforting, and one that opens the floodgates of grace and forgiveness. When the Gospel writers, writing in Greek, use the word it has a philosophical twist. It means, literally, "a change of mind," a reorientation of the soul. When Jesus said, "Repent," the word he must almost certainly have used was a word and an image that rises from his Hebrew background and his understanding of the Hebrew Bible.

Where Greek is a language of the intellect, Hebrew is a language of the body. It is a language rooted in physical realities and deep human emotions. It is a language of pictures and stories. In that profoundly human language, the word for repent comes from the same source as the word for "return." It means, literally, "Come home." The word embodies a universal human experience, coming home -- at the end of a day, after a time of long separation, or at the end of a life. There is in it the intimation of an eager and loving welcome, the promise of grace and forgiveness. That's the image in Jesus' parable of the sheep that has strayed, and of the wastrel son who had no direction to turn other than to "come home."

Come home. Return to the roots and source of your life. Come back to a place where there is no need for all the artificial and tiring protections of the self we have spent a lifetime erecting. Come home to the Father's free welcome. Come home, come home. This is the Kingdom of God. This is the Good News. This is the Gospel of the Lord.